

Stewardship and Change in the Amana Colonies

The purpose of our association as a religious Society is . . . no worldly or selfish one, but the purpose of the love of God in His vocation of grace received by us, to serve Him in the bond of union, inwardly and outwardly according to His laws and His requirements in our own consciences

From the constitution and bylaws of the Community of True Inspiration¹

More commonly known as the Amana Society, members of the Community of True Inspiration established one of the longest-lived communal settlements in the United States and, arguably, one that continues to the present day. Their descendants value their religious communal heritage and are actively working to identify and preserve its important historical qualities. A mainstay since the early 20th century, tourism provides a market for Amana's heritage along with its products and crafts. Stewards of this National Historic Landmark (NHL) want to enhance well-established business and tourism opportunities while protecting their unique cultural resources.

Christian Metz, the "Werzeug" or divine instrument for the group, brought members of the Community of True Inspiration to east central Iowa in the mid-19th century, settling in a

beautiful Iowa River valley approximately 20 miles west of Iowa City and 18 miles south of Cedar Rapids. They initially had settled in upstate New York, near Buffalo, forming the six-village community of Ebenezer in 1842. Soon, however, these German emigres regarded Buffalo's urban growth as a threat to their community, so Metz urged them to relocate to the Midwest. Members moved over a 10-year period, establishing the villages of Amana (1855), West Amana (1856), South Amana (1856), High Amana (1857), East Amana (1860), and Middle Amana (1861).² The community purchased the neighboring town of Homestead, Iowa, in 1861 because it provided rail access for the export of Amana produce.

In 1859, the Community of True Inspiration incorporated under the laws of Iowa as the Amana Society. Meaning "to remain true," the Amana Colonies possess 26,000 acres of some of the nation's most fertile farmland.³ A communal way of life, embraced in New York, was continued in Iowa.⁴ Elders elected to the Great Council, led by the "Werzeug," directed the community of believers. Population remained small, hovering around 1,500 souls; "outsiders" provided a welcome supplemental workforce. Each village operated somewhat independently with a centrally-located church, communal kitchen, school, sandstone residences, shops and busi-

The Amana Agricultural Complex, with the corn crib in the foreground and the granary to the rear. The non-historic fire station is between the two. The corn crib dates from c. 1940, and the granary from the 1890s. This is all part of the old cattle complex in the main village of Amana.





Two residences on Main Street, Amana. The one to the rear appears to be sandstone and to have been converted into a shop. The one in the foreground is in need of restoration, which includes removal of the asphalt siding. Both buildings date from the 1860s.

nesses, agricultural buildings clustered in a quasi-European fashion, and a cemetery lying on the outskirts surrounded by cedar trees. New mothers cared for their children until the age of two, when the children attended kindergarten, and later school through the eighth grade. At that point, young teens were assigned to a specific task, depending on their gender. Women predictably worked in the kitchens, gardens, and kindergartens; while men labored in fields lying beyond the villages, tended the stock, and worked on construction crews, in light manufacturing, or in retail businesses. Some individuals sought training beyond Amana in the medical, legal, or teaching professions and returned to practice in the community.⁵

The communal life worked well until 1932, the time of the “Great Change.” In that year, the Amana Colonies embraced capitalism, a choice determined in 1931 by popular vote. Property was divided and residents were free to find their own livelihoods. The church remained an essential part of life, overseen by the Amana Church Society. Secular matters were directed by the Amana Society, Inc., which functioned as a joint-stock company retaining ownership of a substantial portion of the farm and business operations. Agriculture and light manufacturing, primarily consisting of the production of textiles, furniture, construction materials, and foodstuffs, sustained Amana’s economy.⁶ The refrigeration plant began operating in the 1930s, providing the most visible trademark for the community.⁷

The cultural heritage of the Amana Colonies provided its second most visible “prod-

uct.” From the early days of settlement, the colonies were by no means cut off from the traditional world around them. Visitors came to Amana as customers for its wares, but also as tourists. The unique cultural heritage of the community soon was recognized by the society as an economic boon. The marketing of Amana products drew upon the “home-made” qualities of purity, wholesomeness, and craftsmanship, and still do. The slogan, “Come for the food, Come for the shopping, Stay for the experience,” beckons travelers to detour a mere five miles northward from Interstate 80 to enjoy a respite from the hustle and bustle of modern life. One can also take a virtual tour of Amana through the National Park Service (NPS) web site <<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel>>.

The Colonies received national attention in 1965 when designated as a National Historic Landmark (NHL). Landmark status is proudly heralded as part of Amana’s heritage and part of its appeal to visitors. The Amana Heritage Society, established in the 1960s, provides a cornerstone for preserving the community’s history. It grounds residents and visitors alike in traditional German folkways and communal life, even while seeking opportunities garnered by heritage tourism. In addition to its standard gift shops, restaurants, and inns, the seven villages also feature the Museum of Amana History and other historic buildings, Amana Arts Guild Center, a brewery and several wineries, 18-hole golf course, Iowa welcome center, 3.1-mile Kolonieweg Recreational Trail, 3.2-mile Amana Colonies Nature Trail, outdoor convention center, recreational vehicle (RV) park, and Old Creamery Theater Company.

Despite its cultural emphasis, new construction, suburban development from Cedar Rapids, inappropriate treatment of historic resources, and unchecked deterioration pose very real threats to the community’s historic resources. As a result, the Amana Society, Inc., and Amana Heritage Society have made a concerted effort to identify and protect the community’s historic fabric. Funded by an Iowa Certified Local Government (CLG) grant, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, with participation by the NPS Midwest Regional Office, compiled a re-use study for the community’s more than 100 agricultural buildings. As an outgrowth of that preliminary assessment, the NPS Midwest Regional Office is now collaborating with the Iowa State

Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and Amana Heritage Society on an intensive inventory and survey of the historic barns and agricultural buildings extant in Amana's seven villages. Funded by a grant from the Getty Foundation and Save America's Treasures, work has already begun in the village of "main" Amana to rehabilitate its agricultural buildings. A primary barn has been converted into a "festhouse," used for meetings, festivals, and craft shows, and rehabilitation of others is underway. The cultural landscape corridor of Amana's main street will also receive substantial rehabilitation, through an Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) grant, to provide off-street parking, improved drainage, and handicapped accessibility, while retaining the fabric and character of Amana's charming narrow sidewalks and gutterless streets.

The founding members of the Community of True Inspiration faced daunting challenges before their migration to the United States and during the initial period of settlement. Their descendants have faced challenges, as well, in sustaining the society after the Great Change to capitalism and retaining its historic resources in light of subsequent economic development. Amana residents have succeeded at both, incorporating modern amenities into traditional folkways. In

this way, they demonstrate both the strength of their convictions and goals of heritage tourism, acting as vigilant stewards of their historic resources while sharing their unique religious communal heritage with others.

Notes

- 1 "Purpose," *The Amanas Yesterday: A Religious Communal Society*, 2.
- 2 "Amana Church Society," *The Amanas Yesterday: A Religious Communal Society*, 2.
- 3 "Amana Inspired by the Past" in "Willkommen: Free Guide to the Amana Colonies," 1. The term, "Amana," was taken from the *Song of Solomon*, 4:8.
- 4 Jonathan G. Andelson reports that population ranged from a high of 1,813 residents in 1881 to 1,365 in 1932. See "The Community of True Inspiration from Germany to the Amana Colonies," in Donald E. Pitzer, ed., *America's Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 195.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 190-192.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, 200.

Rachel Franklin-Weekley is an architectural historian with the Cultural Resources Division of the National Park Service Midwest Regional Office in Omaha, Nebraska.

Photos by the author.

NPS Assists in Development of Amana Itinerary

The National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places has participated in a cooperative effort with the Amana Colonies Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Amana Heritage Society, the Iowa State Historic Preservation Office, the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers, and the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions to produce a new travel itinerary <www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/amana/intro.htm> which explores 31 historic places that illustrate the fascinating history of one of the longest lasting communal societies in the world.

Created through a partnership, the Amana Colonies itinerary is an example of a new and exciting cooperative project. As part of the Department of the Interior's strategy to revitalize communities by promoting public awareness of history and encouraging tourists to visit historic places throughout the nation, the National Register of Historic Places is cooperating with communities, regions, and Heritage Areas throughout the United States to create online travel itineraries. Using places listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the itineraries help potential visitors plan their next trip by highlighting the amazing diversity of this country's historic places and supplying accessibility information for each featured site. In the Learn More section, the itineraries link to regional and local web sites that provide visitors with further information regarding cultural events, special activities, and lodging and dining possibilities.